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ABSTRACT

In 1995, Neva M. Viise compared the spelling development of 195 child and 124 adult literacy learners by examining their spelling errors. Children and adults showed similar mastery in recognizing consonants and short vowel inclusions; however, the adults experienced much more difficulty marking syllables in words and were more likely to omit vowels in their spellings. Adults were also more likely to err in their use of marked endings. In general, however, adults appeared to have a better understanding of prefixes and suffixes and manifested a higher rate of mastery of certain spelling features and contractions. Students in both age ranges generally learned and understood single beginning and end consonants before they were able to master double consonants or double consonant clusters. The following conclusions were drawn from Viise's study: (1) adult students must be given sufficient time to master the most basic spelling features of English; (2) spelling is best taught as part of the writing process; and (3) spelling development is helped by allowing students to use invented spelling. It is helpful to identify learners' position in terms of the four developmental stages of spelling identified by Vacca, Vacca, and Gove: the prephonemic stage, the phonemic stage, transitional spelling, and conventional spelling. (MN)

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Research to Practice

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A Review of "A Study of the Spelling Development of Adult Literacy Learners Compared with that of Classroom Children"

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by Bryan Bardine

Summary of Article

A great deal of research has looked at the spelling development of children, but comparatively little has focused on ways adult literacy students develop as spellers. Neva M. Viise, in her article "A Study of the Spelling Development of Adult Literacy Learners Compared with that of Classroom Children," examines some interesting aspects of adults' and children's spelling development. This study "compared the spelling development of 195 child and 124 adult literacy learners through a comparison of spelling errors" (p. 561). The author asks two important questions in this research. First, will adult literacy students progress through the same stages of learning as children who are reading at comparable levels? And, "are the adults who are experiencing severe reading problems caught at some early level of reading-spelling knowledge which must be identified for instruction the same way that children's reading knowledge is assessed?" (p. 564).

Some important results in the study were that children and adults showed similar mastery in recognizing single beginning consonants, single end consonants, and short vowel inclusions. Some notable differences between adults and children were that adults had a much more difficult time marking syllables in words, and they "showed an equally strong tendency to leave out vowels in their spellings" (p. 574). In fact, adults scored 31 percentage points below the children in these areas. Also, adults did not do as well as children in their use of marked endings, primarily because "of their tendency to leave off or change simple *-en, -er, -ed,* and *-es* endings, a problem that rarely occurred among the children" (p. 573). The article mentions the possibility that these suffix difficulties could be a result of dialect problems with the adults, but that reasoning may be too simple a solution because of the ways that the adults substitute one ending for another (i.e.--*shorten* for *shorter)*

In general, adults did seem to have a better understanding of prefixes and suffixes, although this did not alter their pattern of spelling acquisition. Also, adults had a higher rate than children of mastery of certain spelling features, including *-ar, -er,* and *-or* endings, *-ed* and *-ing* endings, and contractions. Further, adults did a better job of "correctly spelling the syllable junctures of intact words," which means that they performed better than the children at separating and spelling words such as "message" and "bottom" (p. 574).

Results of the study indicate that "there is strong evidence that the more difficult spelling features are rarely mastered until the simpler features are

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CE 075 203

understood and accomplished" (p. 577). For instance, students in both age ranges generally learned and understood single-beginning and end consonants before they were able to master double consonants or double consonant clusters.

In two-thirds of the features examined, the mastery scores of the adults and children were within 10% of one another. This finding may indicate that adults and children's spelling skills develop in a similar fashion, and that they both follow a developmental pattern of spelling acquisition. Further, this information tells researchers that adults need the same "careful assessment of literacy skills as do classroom children" (p. 577). Adult spelling assessment tools can be patterned after similar tests made for children's assessment. Other studies have shown that although the primary cause of reading difficulty in adults is unknown, most adults who have reading difficulty "share the problem of limited phonological skills along with the poor ability to identify or decode words and represent them correctly in print" (p. 564).

What do we do next?

Armed with this information, how can we help our adult learners? First, it's crucial to remember that we don't want to move too quickly with our students. That is, research suggests adults need to understand the most basic spelling features of English before they begin to progress to the more difficult features of the language. It's easy to assume students understand particular sounds or spellings, but before we move them to more complex features, let's be sure. Diagnostic evaluations can assist teachers in their understanding of students' spelling strengths and weaknesses.

A second important point is that adults' spelling acquisition develops in a similar pattern to that of children. This point contains several important instructional implications. First, spelling errors may reflect the writers' best effort rather than a careless mistake, and learning to spell involves far more than simply memorizing a few letters and their sounds. Finally, it is important to remember that gradual improvement in spelling is expected. In most cases students will not become accurate spellers overnight; it takes time. For these reasons, we need to evaluate learners' development and consider how well our teaching methods are working with them.

So, then, how can we help our students? Research shows that we learn to spell when proper spelling is important to us. Typically, spelling is best taught as part of the writing process. Students' spelling will improve when they are writing to audiences that matter and for purposes they care about. In these instances, students will be more likely to attend to spelling.

Spelling development is certainly helped by allowing students to use invented spelling. Vacca, Vacca, and Gove (1995) define invented spelling as the "name given to children's misspellings before they have learned the rules of spelling" (p. 79). Also, by using invented spelling, children "expect their writing to make sense and have meaning" (p. 79). Essentially, by enabling kids to practice invented spelling, we are letting them spell words like they sound, which is very helpful for students' writing--particularly in their early drafts. By not focusing on spelling every word correctly, students are more free to express themselves through their writing. On the other hand, when students feel that every word must be spelled correctly, "writing becomes a laborious undertaking rather than a meaning-making act" (p. 81). As teachers, we need to be sure that we allow our students the best opportunity to develop as spellers and writers--clearly using invented spelling techniques accomplishes this goal.

Stages of Spelling Development

We can determine when students have moved up the developmental ladder by learning about and beginning to understand the four developmental stages of spelling. Vacca, Vacca, and Gove list and briefly explain these stages. The first is the prephonemic stage. In this stage, students know some letters, and they begin to experiment with the letters and the sounds that they make. Students may also develop "a one-to-one correspondence between the initial consonant or final consonant of a word and the words" (p. 82). For instance, they may associate the

sound the letter B makes with the entire word *back* or with the K sound at the end of the word. Eventually, they will expand their learning to the point they will include the consonant boundaries of words. For example, for the word *back*, a speller in the prephonemic stage may write *bk* as its spelling.

The second stage in spelling development is the phonemic stage. At this level students are beginning to use vowels in the words they write. Also, students are able to "sound their way through a word making sound-letter matches as they write" (p. 82). Students still use one-to-one matching, but it is much more sophisticated than in the prephonemic stage. For instance, students in the phonemic stage may write BOT for boat, rather than BT. They are beginning to connect vowel and consonant sounds to the letters that the sounds represent. Both prephonemic and phonemic spellers tend to be beginning readers.

The third level of spelling development is transitional spelling. At this point, because students have been exposed to more reading and writing practice, they "begin to abandon the notion that there has to be a one-to-one match between a spoken word and a graphic symbol" (p. 82). Students' development is further enhanced by their increased awareness of consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) patterns. Words such as BET, BAT, HAT, HOT, etc. become easier for them to read and spell. With increased reading and writing, recognizing more complex patterns such as CVVC or CVCe (consonant-vowel-consonant-silent vowel) begins to occur as well.

The final stage is conventional spelling. At this stage the students have now "developed many accurate notions of how to spell words that conform to the standard rules of the language" (p. 82). In this stage, students use correct spelling more frequently, and their communication skills should continue to improve also. Students' progress through these developmental stages varies greatly depending on the individuals, but just recognizing the different stages can help teachers better understand how to help their students.

Conclusion

Viise identifies several topics which need further study: the variability of dialects in spelling acquisition, learning disabilities, phonological processing difficulties, and differences in instructional practice between adults and children. Based on the information from the Viise article as well as the background knowledge about the stages of spelling development, teachers have a solid base from which to begin learning about spelling acquisition in adult literacy students. Viise's article is available at the Ohio Literacy Resource Center (see box below).

References

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